The Epic of Gilgamesh

From *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, it is clear that Gilgamesh and Enkidu complement each other and have strong mutual feelings for each other. Are they a gay couple or two sides of the psyche?

Expert Answers

It is not really implied in this poem that Gilgamesh and Enkidu are a gay couple. Certainly they are extremely close, they come to share a very deep bond, and Gilgamesh is inconsolable at Enkidu's death. However, to suggest that they have some kind of homosexual relationship is probably more reflective of modern critical trends than of the poem itself. Rather their relationship may be characterized as a **homosocial** one, that is to say they share a very close male friendship, as though they were brothers. This depiction of homosocial relationships is common to the ancient heroic tradition: think of the friendship between Achilles and Patrocles in Homer's *Iliad*, where Achilles is similarly devastated by the death of Patrocles and sets out to wreak revenge. The heroes of ancient epic, then, are often portrayed as having a close male friend with whom they ride to battle and share all other manner of dangers and adventures. Their bond is strengthened by all the activities that they share together, but such relationships do not need to have a sexual element.

There is more of a case for regarding Gilgamesh and Enkidu as being representative of the different sides of the human psyche. Although there are some similarities between them, like their great strength and bravery, the differences between the two are more noteworthy – and they are consciously conceived as being opposites. Gilgamesh is the worldly-wise, cultured king, at the very centre of human society whereas Enkidu lives out in caves far from human habitation and among wild beasts, and himself appears as rough, hairy, completely unrefined. Gilgamesh represents worldly knowledge, custom, and civilization; Enkidu is a savage, representing the wilder, untutored side of the human psyche. In a word, he symbolizes nature. Yet these two come together and form a powerful bond – they are not shown to be antithetical, but capable of co-existence. Indeed, it goes further than that. The story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu shows how really one is incomplete without the other. Their friendship represents a uniting of opposites, and suggests that both are needed in order to lead a whole and rounded-out existence.

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